

Module # 6

Feelings and Emotions

By

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The topic of learning how to deal with the emotions and feelings runs neck-and-neck with improving and repairing relationships, in terms of being the most requested subject.

I don't think this is any surprise, because when we're active in our addiction I think we generate all kinds of unpleasant emotional turmoil within us and affecting those around us.

We have, for the most part learned abstinence. But how to go about repairing ourselves and our relationships with the world around us is a whole other story. This is not easy work, but it can be done. In fact, I would say needs to be done.

Let's look at some tools and methods that can get us pointed in the right direction. Don't get discouraged remember its "progress not perfection".

Emotions and Feelings

Two things I'm certain of, and that's people who are active in their addiction, or in early recovery, really have a difficult time with:

1. Emotions and Feelings

2. Relationships

As we all know, alcohol and other drugs have a biological and psychological effect on the brain, especially on neurotransmitters. These effects can continue on for quite some time for after we have stopped using the alcohol or drugs.

Aside from physical symptoms, there may be emotional and cognitive symptoms that you may experience. Just about everybody entering early recovery has noted extreme mood swings. While not particularly pleasant, they are not abnormal in the least.

Sometimes these mood swings can get so extreme they can actually interfere with how well you can function in day to day living. You may be hyper, or in the best of moods one day, on a pink cloud. And shortly there after, even opening your eyes and getting out of bed can be a challenge.

There are no definitive answers to why these mood swings occur, but the best guess is that it is a combination of physiological and psychological factors. One thing that is fairly certain, is the radical degree of mood swings tends to temper and lessen with time.

The time frame for the moderation of mood swings is usually towards the end of the first year recovery, but that is not written in stone.

There Are Some Things You Should Know About Feelings:

Feelings, come about in response to an action or an event. The more dramatic or radical the event the more dramatic or intense the emotion. Usually emotions tend to follow changes. I can't think of anything more radical than moving from a life of Addiction into one of recovery. Its it's actually pretty unrealistic not to expect mood swings with the changes we are undergoing.

If feelings are pushed down, suppressed, or ignored, they don't just go away or disappear.

I think of an old fashioned pressure cooker, like my grandmother had, with that little nob on top that used to hiss and rock back and forth. Well, if you were to screw that pressure relief valve down tight, turn up the heat something's going to blow up, and it usually comes out sideways. Feelings are the same way stuff them dpwn, turn up the heat and they will blow up...usually at an innocent person. There is an ever increasing body of research and evidence that says that unresolved feelings can actually affect your physical health.

Often, early in recovery we lack the ability to identify our feelings accurately. It is as if we do not have the vocabulary to identify them, you can mistake anger for fear, laughter covering shame, or use the catchall phrase by stating "I'm fine".

If you do not learn how to **identify, own and process feelings** and emotions, you may be tempted to return to drinking and drugging. Unfortunately, drinks and drugs are very effective at nullifying unpleasant feelings and emotions.

You can change your feelings. No matter how suddenly they arise, or how strong they may be, you can certainly control your reaction to them and transform them into less damaging actions.

Our second week was spent examining very closely and rigorously, the concept of honesty. Well, honesty and emotions can be linked together, and there's a term often use called emotional honesty.

If you can develop the concept of emotional honesty, you develop the ability to care about yourself and love yourself. Issues of low self-esteem will improve. If you care about, and love yourself, that will enable you to have functional and fulfilling relationships with others.

Feelings Are Not Facts

Feelings are not facts... OK I give up, what we talking about.

Well, you may feel a certain feeling, you are certainly entitled to that, it is real to you, but that might not be the fact what is going on in reality. Here's an example: you walk into a meeting, or a room of people, and feel that everybody's staring at you, not only that, but nobody likes you.

The fact of the matter is most assuredly, that you walked into the room, maybe everybody's even looking at you; but it's a far stretch of the imagination to believe that everybody dislikes you immediately. In reality, some people may be taking immediate liking to you, some might be neutral, and then again, some may actually dislike your first appearance.

Your perceptions and feelings may be completely different from what is really going on.

One of the perils, of not pushing yourself to work through uncomfortable feelings, is staying stuck in the rut of being comfortable and staying with old familiar things. Stunted growth. If you feel that everybody is always staring at you, and disliking you, isn't it tempting not to venture out or try to meet new people?

Fear is often at their root of reluctance to work on or challenge our feelings. In fact, in the 12 and 12 book of Alcoholics Anonymous it states "self-centered fear is the activator of our character defects". We will devote an entire section to handling fear in an upcoming module.

Unless we are growing in recovery and "working on feelings and emotions" very little progress will be made in personal growth, forming, or repairing relationships.

Why is this true you may ask? Because...

"The ability to identify, own, and process our feelings determines the quality of our relationships"

How can we possibly enter into a loving relationship but we do not love ourselves?
How can we respect another, when we do not respect ourselves?

A huge problem that we face in recovery is to allow your emotional response to other people dictate your behavior. In other words worrying about what people will think if I do this or I don't do that. Perhaps that is the fear of rejection speaking, or the fear of acting the fool, but in any event, it is part of working with feelings and emotions to own and accept your feelings.

Feelings aren't right or wrong they just are.

Let's use the example to illustrate this point. We are all at 12 Step meeting, and Sally walks in 15 minutes late:

Joe sees this and thinks "Who does she think she is, interrupting everybody, doesn't she have the common decency and respect to be here on time?" He gets angry.

Alison sees Sally walk in and says "Oh my goodness, I haven't seen her in a long time, I want to talk to her after the meeting." She is glad.

Barry sees Sally walk again doesn't know her, and could care less if she is there or not. He is completely neutral.

Now, who is right and who's wrong? Isn't it interesting the same event precipitated 3 different reactions or feelings in different people; happiness, anger, and neutrality?

I thought that was a pretty jazzy example, no? But where did these feelings come from? How can the same event spark happiness, anger, and a lack of feeling?

In part, I believe, the first feeling that comes up for you when an event or an action is witnessed is probably based on your experience, your upbringing, and your mood or receptivity. I think questioning "why" a particular feeling sprang up at a particular time is a dead end path.

It is much more important that you can identify the feeling, own it, and process it appropriately, rather than determine the cause. The core of all feelings and emotions work has three parts:

1. Identify the feeling

2. Own the feeling

3. Process the feeling

1. Identifying feelings - for people addicted to drugs and alcohol is very common not to be able to correctly or accurately to identify feelings and emotions. I believe a major part of the problem is that we simply have not developed the vocabulary to express feelings. In many therapy groups in which I participated, there's an exercise called a 'go round'. Everyone is asked to go round the room and tell the group how they're feeling in 1 or 2 words. Common answers are: good, fine, shitty etc. Now I'm not dumb, I kind of know what they're saying, but what is 'shitty' to you might not be 'shitty' to me.

Another serious difficulty people have when talking about feelings, is that they are often talking about thoughts, explanations and telling stories not simply stating their feelings.

2. Owning our feelings - This is another concept that is sometimes difficult to grasp, but is very important to understand. To have feelings is OK and normal, but they are

yours. You must own them. The important point here is that nobody can "make" you feel a certain way. A statement like "you make me so mad when you come home late", is not accurate when we are talking about owning feelings. A more accurate way to express that is "when you come home late I become mad." see the difference?

3. Processing our feelings - there's a lot of literature devoted to the proper expression of feelings. There many tips on how to properly express anger, concern, etc. I will leave it to you to explore this aspect further. I'm going to go one better. Rather than teach you how to properly express your feelings I'm going to give you ideas on how to change your feelings.

"Men are disturbed if not by you events, but by the views which they take of them."

Epictetus – A.D 55-135

Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy

Don't be scared by those \$5 words, rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT) was created by Elbert Ellis around 1955. It is based on the same ideas quoted above by freed Roman slave turned philosopher around 2000 years ago.

Is really as simple as ABC. A + B = C

- A) An action or a event occurs, something happens.
- B) You form a belief about that action or event. (A)
- C) You form an emotional reaction to that belief (B)

Let's work through an example:

- A) My boyfriend said he would call me tonight and he didn't.
- B) He knew was important, he doesn't care about me anymore.
- C) I get angry because all men are rats.

Now, one of the keys to changing your emotions, is to actually change your beliefs about the about the event or action that started the whole process. If we work through the above example: we cannot change the fact that your boyfriend did not call.

What we can, and must do, is a challenge our beliefs (B) about why he didn't call. Instead of believing that he does not care about me anymore, I can choose to believe that he simply forgot, and on the whole is a pretty decent guy. I can then even choose to feel good about myself for forgiving him.

Can you see how the key is in challenging your beliefs about an action? You could choose to believe all men rats or you could choose to believe that he was forgetful just this once.

I don't know about you, but if there are two equally plausible beliefs I can have about the situation...

All things being equal, I will try to choose the one that causes me the least amount of pain.

I hate to bum you out, but there's one more addition to the equation of ABC, and that is "D". the D is for **Dispute**. $A+B+C+D$

The whole point of REBT is to get a person changing their irrational beliefs into rational beliefs, that's where the 'R' in REBT comes from. We do that by disputing our beliefs about the action of the situation.

This is a simplified model of REBT. The basic point of the ABC concept is that A (the event) does not cause C (the emotion). The action or the event does not lead directly to an emotion springing up. A leads to B, which is your interpretation or belief about the action in the event, your belief or interpretation then gives rise to the emotion. If you dispute your interpretation of the event you will change your emotion is the outcome of your interpretation.

That may sound a little complicated, but if you go back and look over the example, the key lies with your belief about the action. Make up a few examples of your own and work through them, it will make more sense.

Here's how I work it: When I dispute my beliefs about the events or actions I tend to ask myself these 3 questions:

1. What is REALLY going on here? Maybe I've got it all wrong.
2. How important is this anyway?
3. Do I need to do something about it right now?

Taking the time to answer those three questions has saved me an incredible amount of embarrassment, and amends being owed.

The Three Basic "Musts"

According to REBT, there are three irrational and illogical beliefs that can cause all sorts of aggravation and trouble. Do any sound familiar to you?

1. I "must" get what I want, when I want it. If I don't want something I'd better not get. If I can't get what I want it's a terrible tragedy. Poor impulse control.
2. I "must" win the approval of others for my actions or I am no good and have little value.
3. Everyone "must" treat me exactly the way I want to be treated in a kind fair and considerate manner, if they don't, they are rats and should be punished.

Acceptance and Peace

If you remember, in previous discussions about addiction we mentioned the fact that we can be in a great deal of denial. Our perception of reality is altered, and we have created fantasies in order to allow us to continue using.

One of the goals of doing work on emotions and feelings is to arrive at a condition of acceptance, specifically an acceptance of reality. That includes the idea that things don't go the way we want them to all the time. Others don't behave the way we want them at our request. We (not them) must make some adjustments. Here are tools to help. Here's what we're aiming for:

Accepting Yourself Unconditionally:

1. As part of being a human, I will fail occasionally. I have my strong points and my weak points, my good points and my bad points.
2. In spite of my strengths and weaknesses, I am no better nor worse than any other person.
3. It is OK to have flaws, I don't have to be perfect all the time.

Unconditionally Accepting The People Around You:

1. No one is perfect, and sometimes I will be treated in an unfair fashion.
2. People don't "have" to treat me fairly.
3. If someone doesn't treat me well it does not necessarily mean they are rats, or better than me.

Accepting Life On Life's Terms:

1. Who said life will always work out the way I wanted to? Sometimes things won't work out according to my plan.
2. Life is not always happy, the joyous, and free, but then again it is not always completely black or gray and unbearable.
3. Life does not "have" to go the way I want it, sometimes it won't. Sure as the sun will rise tomorrow, all my plans will not come through.

Emotional Honesty

If we combine honesty, together with enhanced ability to handle our emotions, we come up with a very powerful aid to employ toward personal growth and our maturity in recovery, something called the emotional honesty.

Emotional honesty means becoming aware of each time our feelings are hurt, and attending to the distress that it causes at the time it occurs. By correctly identifying the feeling, owning it as our own, and changing it into something less harmful, we greatly reduce the chance that an undealt with emotion can turn into a relapse trigger.

Emotional honesty means taking responsibility for what we feel rather than taking seeking a method for escaping it. We need to:

1. Stay in the present, not the past, or future
2. Do the next right thing, and *let go of outcomes*.
3. Stay positive

4. Be open to and willing to change, make mistakes, admit when we're wrong, and grow. This is what is to be human.

In Closing:

I believe one of the most difficult tasks involved in our growth in addiction recovery is to do your emotions and feelings work. The satisfaction and growth in this area it does not come overnight, it can take weeks, months, and years.

A gentle word of caution... is not to superimpose your own time frame over your work on emotions feelings and relationships. In other words, we think things should be happening quickly or right away. We might have unrealistic time frame expectations. Healing and growth in this area can often take much longer than we anticipate.

"To me, there are three things we all should do every day. We should do this every day of our lives. Number one is laugh. You should laugh every day. Number two is think. You should spend some time in thought. And number three is, you should have your emotions moved to tears, could be happiness or joy. But think about it. If you laugh, you think, and you cry, that's a full day. That's a heck of a day. You do that seven days a week, you're going to have something special."

-Jim Valvano-

"Take control of your consistent emotions and begin to consciously and deliberately reshape your daily experience of life."

-Anthony Robbins-


"They may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel."

-Carl W. Buechner-

*"You can close your eyes to the things you do not want to see,
but you cannot close your heart to the things you do not want to
feel."*

-Unknown-

See You Next Week!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bill Urell". The letters are cursive and somewhat stylized, with the 'B' and 'U' being particularly prominent.

Bill Urell